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**THE POSSIBILITY OF CHRISTIAN PHILOSOPHY: MAURICE BLONDEL AT THE
INTERSECTION OF THEOLOGY AND PHILOSOPHY** by Adam C. English, Routledge, London and
New York, 2007, pp. x + 144, £80/\$145 hbk

Few detailed studies exist in English of Catholic philosopher Maurice Blondel. He is best-known for his highly controversial 1893 *L'action*, in which he demonstrated the incoherence of any analysis of human action that sought to deny its ultimate grounding in absolute, divine action. In this lucid, concise, well-researched and carefully-argued study, Adam English extends our horizons forwards through Blondel's later and less well-known oeuvre, in particular his later trilogy on thought, being and action.

For much of his life, Blondel was swimming against two tides: the caustic secularism of the Third Republic *philosophes*, who regarded philosophy as a self-validating, nihilistic discourse, and the neo-Thomism of his own Church, which saw philosophy's function as being to interpret data already provided by revelation. Neither could countenance the possibility that philosophy might lead to knowledge of God. On the contrary, protested Blondel, if the philosopher commences not with ideas but with action, the reverse is proven: that the soul harbours within itself a will to be, which necessarily closes the gap between the will that wills objects in the abstract (the *volonté voulante*) and the will that chooses the concrete purposes actually willed in reality (the *volonté voulou*), and as such originates in divine action. This can even be seen as a new ontological proof for God's existence from action. Whether Christian philosophy was possible, and if so what form it took, was debated extensively in the period 1928 to 1936, and this debate is helpfully reviewed on pp. 26–30. But as English shows, Blondel came to see that this focus alone assumed too readily that humans will action and the unification of their personhood in God. Hence the importance of his later works, in which he shifts from descriptive phenomenology into ontology and deontology.

In *La pensée*, Blondel delineates the intentional, purposeful structure that thought identifies in the universe. Like the will, thought contains two potentially divergent aspects: the noetic (approximating to the notional) and the pneumatic (approximating to the real). Both are incorporated into his transnaturalism, which he saw as avoiding the dangers of polarization continually inherent in the supernatural-natural view of reality. Rather, all created being tends centripetally towards God's own being in Christ, in whom all things hold together. In order not to be seen itself as a new variety of pantheism, this must be regarded in light of Blondel's

later methodological turn from immanence to implication. The former had been understood as giving too much ground to uninterrogated experience, whereas a method of implication is rooted in the deeper soil of interpretation and intelligibility. Moreover, English shows that Blondel, unlike de Lubac, by no means denied the existence of pure nature. For Blondel, ‘to see our “pure” nature is to see ourselves as we really are: selfish and weak. It is to make a pure evaluation without blinders. [He] uses pure nature to counter any temptation of an autonomous and natural philosophy or a Pelagian soteriology.’ (p. 45) This negative view of pure nature as inachievement provides an important counterweight to de Lubac’s negative construal of the concept.

Notwithstanding Blondel’s view of humanity as adhering or attracted to the divine, it demonstrates his strong wish to continue to conceive the real, material context of human action, and a view of the incorporation of the believer into the divine life as enacted, albeit imperfectly, in present life rather than awaited passively in future resurrected life.

The second and third portions of the trilogy can, although important, be delineated more briefly. In *L’Être et les êtres*, Blondel makes clear the centrality in his ontology of mystery. For Blondel, mystery was entirely concrete: the activity of the absolute within the relative itself. As such, mystery could be discovered and entered into. By means of this concept, he distanced himself from the widespread intuitionism that stemmed from Rosmini and was predicated on a univocal view of being. For the same reason, he adopted an *analogia creatio* in preference to an *analogia entis*, situating his entire ontology within divine creative action. Blondel’s revised *L’action*, forming the final instalment of his trilogy, enables him to present action as personal, social and divine power. Through the concept of ‘agnition’, he again places centre stage the willing actor, in whose person are synthesized poesis, practice and contemplation. English states: ‘God is most properly depicted as *actus purus*, the wellspring of all force and the efficient cause (*causa efficiens*) of everything that moves and has being.’ God is therefore not so much distant cause but mediator, in Laberthonière’s words the ‘very movement of life as principle and end’ (pp. 95–6). Christ’s primary office is to act as this supreme mediator. Although such ‘panchristism’ could be seen to smack of Scotism, we might push further the mitigating insight offered that the (Teilhardian) view of Christ as Alpha and Omega posits Christ giving to the created order both its end and its beginning, rather than being reducible to the created order, in a fashion wholly compatible with a high doctrine of God as *actus purus*.

